

## A Content Analysis of Readers' Comments on Political and Economic News Articles from Zimbabwe Online Media

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**ABSTRACT** Web 2.0 technologies have promoted media audience interaction and participation, which was beforehand limited to traditional media through the letters that were sent to the editor and radio conversations. This paper studies the media audiences found on readers' public commentary forums attached to political and economic news articles. The paper implements a qualitative content analysis to analyze readers' perspectives on the political and economic situation in Zimbabwe by extracting comments found on *NewZimbabwe.com*, *Herald.co.zw*, *Nehandaradio.com* and *Zimeye.com*. This paper reveals that the perspectives of readers on political and economic issues are extremely contrary influenced by political or media polarization. The paper shows that readers' divergent views on the political economy are distributed amid the political opinions and roles played by either ZANU-PF or MDC.

### INTRODUCTION

Public commentary forums have become a ubiquitous feature of participatory journalism online practiced by media audiences, who comment on news reports and even discuss on social media (Siapera and Veglis 2012: 112; Jiang et al. 2016). A discursive online community of news-readers participates on these public forums, by commenting on news articles while they interact. These comments offer researchers with content to sample and analyze the participants' perspectives on issues discussed. However, only readers with technological privileges to access the news reports online can be analyzed. Their views may not necessarily represent a wider population of those who are not participating on these online public forums. The comments found on these public forums may belong to mainly a population of readers with cell phones, personal computers and other digital devices and can afford to be online.

Online newspapers have advanced a culture of interaction by media audiences which was beforehand limited. Readers or listeners only participated by sending letters to the editor or by calling radio during certain programs (Wahl-Jorgensen 2001: 303-304). The letters to the editor section on newspapers acted as means of interaction between the readers and the editor. Hence, the letters to the editor were historically perceived as "among the few outlets available to

the public for voicing opinion, for promoting a debating society and a public forum for democratic" transitions (Hynds 1991: 124; Kapoor and Botan 1992: 5). The studies on letters to the editors do not show much on how this section constitutes a public forum (Wahl-Jorgensen 2001: 304). The editors were only able to select and publish few letters from the readers due to the space limit on newspapers.

The researchers view the online participation of readers on news sites commentary forums, where they share their personal views as a form of a "public sphere" (Habermas 1989: 73). A public sphere entails "the access to information by all citizens, who are guaranteed freedom of expression, freedom of association and freedom of assembly and the right to publish their own opinions without repression" (Habermas 1989: 73). The readers' commentary forums give participants freedom of participation since the site is not restricted, although some of the news sites would need one to log in. Therefore, the readers' interaction forum resembles a public arena in which all available on the forum participate and access information. In other words, readers engage in political participation or discussion with other citizens "holding potentially diverse viewpoints from across the country or world" (Scheufele and Nisbet 2002:16).

Some studies have been interrogating and identifying kinds of publics that participate on

public commentary forums, social media and other sites that promote audience participation (Bennett and Iyengar 2008; Nisbet 2010: 75; Meraz and Papacharissi 2013). These include *Facebook* political groups, those who share political videos on *YouTube* and re-tweet articles of political interest (Marichal 2013). Morozov (2011: 179) states that these *Facebook* political groups are prompted by *slacktivism*, referring to “the ease with which individuals can create and join communities of interest”. However, these online political communities are criticized for existing without an impact on real political outcomes or changes (Christensen 2011). In Zimbabwe, particularly, faceless online personalities emerged known as *Baba Jukwa* posting allegations of scandals and corruption against politicians and state officials (Harding 2013).

Online blogging has also been practiced by both, journalists and civic individuals or groups (Domingo and Heinonen 2008: 3). Most of the weblogs are personal and some are shared by the institutional media. Personal weblogs share the current events mostly with the author’s feeling and experiences, and hence publishing outside professional journalism (Matheson 2004). Domingo and Heinonen (2008: 7) identify different types of blogs, namely “the audience blog, the journalistic blog, the media blog and the citizen blog”. The “audience blogs” include the readers who participate on media platforms, “journalistic blogs” are produced by independent journalists who exercise their rights outside their organizations, “citizen blogs” are a product of publics or citizens bypassing the professional media and “media blogs” include the media content written by professional journalists within their organizations (Domingo and Heinonen 2008: 7).

The above types of blogs show that “the media and communications landscape has changed ways” in which people can access information that “make it possible for envisioning more engaged citizen participation” (Banda 2010: 8). Citizen participation in the Internet spaces promotes public discussions because equal participation is granted, with freedom of expression (Banda 2010). This way, citizens are able to express themselves. Their political participation on the Internet public forums may not necessarily effect political changes but may make them feel good and active (Shulman 2005; Hindman 2009).

Thus, these dynamics of political participation by groups and individuals or audiences have been categorized in different journalistic activities. Nip (2006: 212-216) distinguishes this participation into “citizen participation, interactive journalism, public journalism and participatory journalism”. This is close in form to different types of blogs identified by Domingo and Heinonen (2008) but the difference is, Nip (2006) explains, online participation in terms of journalism. Interactive journalism includes users’ generated content in response to news articles by professional journalists (Greer and Mensing 2003; Ye and Li 2004; Rosenberry 2005). These “free themselves from linearity set by the professional journalists” (Nip 2006: 216). This refers to readers’ or audience blogs on institutional news forum.

Public journalism “aims to engage the people as citizens both in the news-making process and the use of the news” (Nip 2006: 216). Participatory journalism is recently seen as “giving news users the chance to express their views” and professional journalists use the news produced by the users or readers (Nip 2006: 218; Kim and Lowrey 2014). Participatory and citizen journalism are sometimes used synonymously, because citizen journalism is seen “as an individual, group without involvement from paid, trained professionals” (Nip 2006: 218). This means activities online can be differentiated among participants, who produce news and those who respond without their comments being edited by professional journalists.

### Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this paper are to analyze readers’ comments attached to political and economic news articles. The paper aims to analyze the readers’ economic and political disputes on public forums, which might have a general impact on the public interest in Zimbabwe.

It is noteworthy that the newspapers in Zimbabwe have been giving news coverage to prominent people such as politicians and other elites while the ordinary citizens usually find a limited coverage. This promotes partisan news that serves political interests of a small group at the expense of the nation (Moyo 2004: 12; Chibwe 2016). Moyo (2012: 12) argue that the ruling elites monopolize the media to promote their own political interests and agendas by suppressing the popular voices on national issues.

Also, some studies in Zimbabwe have been focusing on the mainstream media that covers prominent people leaving out the concerns of the general publics (Chuma 2008; Chibwe 2016; Mungwari and Vhutuza 2016). This paper, therefore, covers this gap by using a content analysis to analyze ordinary citizens' comments on political and economic news articles online in order to address (or redress) the participatory limitations in the public sphere.

### Literature Review

Recent studies focus on analyzing comments generated by the readers of online news articles (Abdul-Mageed 2008; Singer 2009; Manosevitch and Walker 2009; Diakopoulos and Naaman 2011; Milioni et al. 2012; Ajiboye 2013; Henrich and Holmes 2013; Shigeta et al. 2016). These studies explore the role of discursive spaces, user engagement on public platforms and their perspectives.

Singer (2009) focuses on analyzing the readers' comments found on three Scottish newspapers through a content analysis. The paper identifies the online discursive communities, their characteristics and their political discourse. Singer (2009) notes that public forums online enable participants to interact and debate pertinent issues that affect their daily lives. The discussion online also serves as a platform for social interaction and community building (Singer 2009).

Another paper by Ajiboye (2013) analyzes the discursive strategies used by readers on news feedback forums and how the news articles influence opinion. Ajiboye (2013) collected 201 readers' comments attached to online news reports on the socio-political problems in Nigeria. The findings of the paper highlight that readers are social actors that form an online discursive community to influence social attitudes and opinion (Ajiboye 2013). These readers also share information based on social circumstances or socio-political contexts. Three ideological strategies identified by Ajiboye (2013) are that readers viewed as social actors use hyperbole resulting into generalization and polarization.

A content analysis was also used by Milioni et al. (2012) to study user generated user content found on Greek online media. Their paper notes that readers' interaction and discussion give less information on news issues and raises low quality arguments. In other words, Milioni

et al. (2012) inform that the media sets the discussion agenda and readers do not further discuss beyond the agenda set by the media.

Manosevitch and Walker (2009) examine the two American major newspapers and uses content analysis to sample and explore readers' comments attached to publications online of these newspapers. Their argument is that readers show much desire for public interaction and public deliberation. Manosevitch and Walker (2009) observe the pattern of readers' interaction and say that readers stay online for hours to debate and answer one another's concerning issues under discussion. Readers' comments are analytical, critical, factual and rational of the social order and their comments can be taken into consideration for problem solving. Readers respond to each other, share additional links for information and provoke the discussion. Some "commenters were engaged in the discussion at more than one point in its lifecycle" (Manosevitch and Walker 2009: 21).

*"Commenters respond to each other by direct reference to username or by responding to questions posed, clarifying positions or following up with information."* (Manosevitch and Walker 2009: 21)

On the other hand, Diakopoulos and Naaman (2011) look into the readers' comments found on *SacBee.com* and agree that news sites are becoming public platforms for community members to discuss issues left out by the media. They further reflect that readers' discourse online reflects conflicts and differences in opinion representing a real public community. Readers' comments are offensive and reflect a nature of topicality (Diakopoulos and Naaman 2011). The offensive nature of readers' comments provokes response and insults (Diakopoulos and Naaman 2011).

Abdul-Mageed (2008) investigates media users' comments found on *Al Jazeera* news site by analyzing political and military issues related to the Arab World (Abdul-Mageed 2008). They note that readers' comments are "a rich source of qualitative data that reflect public opinion and provide insight into how decisions are made and beliefs formed" (Henrich and Holmes 2013: 1). Another paper by Schuth et al. (2007) posits that readers can correct, inform and share knowledge based on facts. Readers also show support by clicking a like symbol. On the other hand, Henrich and Holmes (2013: 2) argue that read-

ers' opinions "cannot be taken as representative of the views of the general population".

Furthermore, Strandberg and Berg (2013) also use a content analysis as method to analyze user generated content on Finnish online news by sampling 300 readers' comments within three weeks of data collection. Their paper notes that readers' comments reflect a democratic discourse and non-democratic conversation.

McMillan (2013: iii) explores the "deliberative properties of social interaction in online comment thread" by sampling readers' comments found on *hill.com*, *the nationalreview.com* and *nation.com*. The paper shows "evidence of informal conversational style" by demonstrating themes for social interaction such as the "tolerance for hostility, encouraging quality debate and a value of information exchanges" (McMillan 2013: iii).

### Political Media Discourse in Zimbabwe

For the past few years, political discourse in Zimbabwe has been dominated by factionalism politics. The country experienced disintegration of politicians from major political parties such as the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) and the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). Chibwe (2016) employs a content analysis to study the news articles on *Mujuru* suspension from ZANU-PF published by *The Daily News* and *The Herald* newspapers. His paper concludes that the positioning of political news between *The Daily News* and *The Herald* is often polarized and does not inform audience with sound political decisions. This adds to the findings that the media in Zimbabwe is oppositional between the state controlled and the privately owned (Chuma 2008). Media audiences, therefore experience media polarization that often jeopardizes its informative and educative role (Chibwe 2016).

Mungwari and Vhutuza (2016: 115) also use a content analysis to study state-controlled and privately owned media in Zimbabwe, argue that the media reflect factional politics. The media is divided between the state controlled press and the privately funded press, and the positioning or selection of news is parallel or antagonistic. They find out that the state controlled media is currently used for infightings within ZANU-PF factionalists (Mungwari and Vhutuza 2016: 115).

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A research method feasible for this paper is content analysis because it is one method that can be used to analyze a corpus of readers' comments or texts. Krippendorff (2004: 41) writes, "Content analysis can handle the unstructured matter as data". Readers' comments are texts or expressions meant to be seen, read, interpreted and noted for their meanings, and hence content analysis is used to analyze these comments (Krippendorff 2004: xiii). This involves coding of readers' comments since "coding is one among several procedural components of content analysis" (Krippendorff 2004: 125).

Content analysis consists of both qualitative and quantitative methodologies, and this paper adopts a qualitative content analysis as the main research methodology. Qualitative content analysis is taken as "an approach of empirical methodological controlled analysis of texts within their context of communication without rash quantification" (Mayring 2005: 5). This research approach interprets readers' comments within their context of communication. Readers' comments have to be coded into categories, requiring the content analysis to explore these themes or meanings from texts or readers' comments.

### Population

The population for this paper consists of the readers online, who are assumed to be Zimbabwean, though it is possible that others also participate for whatever reasons.

The data collection was based on a purposive extraction of the readers' comments from the public commentary forums found on four online news publications, namely, *Newzimbabwe.com*, *Herald.co.zw*, *Nehandaradio.com* and *Zimeye.com*. The selected websites were chosen on the basis of their popularity among Zimbabwe's Internet users and provide readers an opportunity to comment on news stories.

### Sampling Technique

Purposive or judgmental sampling was used to reach a sample of 400 comments extracted from a population of 212 commenters. This involved the collection of readers' comments attached to stories on political or economic mat-

ters. The time frame for data collection extended from 1 March 2014 to 30 June 2014. The readers' comments, however were extracted a month after this period as participation often continues to occur for an unspecified period after publication.

Every single comment was extracted as a unity of analysis (Beverly and Beckey 2016: 3). This was determined by the number of comments found on each and every news story selected. For example, the user-generated content on *Newzimbabwe.com* is often larger than the rest found on online news websites, and *Herald.co.zw* has also a larger audience than *Nehandaramedia.com* and *Zimeye.com*.

## RESULTS

This section presents a qualitative content analysis of readers' comments on political and economic news articles published on *NewZimbabwe.com*, *Herald.co.zw*, *Nehandaradio.com* and *Zimeye.com*. A corpus of 400 readers' comments were coded and categorized into political and economic themes and their sub-themes using NVivo 10. The coding process was done inductively, whereas comments were studied within their contextual use with regard to the objective of the research.

The contextual meaning of words was drawn from the readers' comments as units of analysis. Every comment analyzed and coded has specific words or synonyms that are highlighted or underlined in reference to specific inferences.

Therefore, this section begins with looking into the political discourse, drawing the political meanings from texts. It also covers the economic discourse that includes several economic factors presented by readers online. The political and economic issues are interwoven.

### Online Discourse

Readers' comments reflect vibrant political activity rather than just a mere political discussion. Their political discourse encompasses economic issues that show that the discussion is interwoven with both political and economic issues.

Figure 1 depicts the political and economic issues discussed online. It shows the main themes at the center of the diagram and sub-themes on the periphery of the diagram that indicate the overall discussion online.

### Political Discourse

Most of the readers are either affiliated with ZANU-PF or Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). The researchers noted that almost 81 readers engaged in the discussion on the concept of ZANU-PF's political dominance. Their comments revolve around the issues of land reform program, the liberation struggle and the indigenization of foreign companies and the economic meltdown in Zimbabwe.

On the other hand, 26 sources are found to be anti-ZANU-PF as they hold multiple perspectives on political issues, namely corruption, dictatorship and abuse of power by political leaders. Table 1 presents few readers' comments on ZANU-PF political leadership and their comments reflect a two types of groups with political opinion differences.

The discursive community also reveals intra-ZANU-PF conflicts or divisions. Few political leaders are highly mentioned as more influential than others within the party, for instance, those against corruption.

Anti-ZANU-PF readers largely show their allegiance with MDC. The researchers realized that almost sixty-five percent of the studied readers online are pro-MDC. A population of 13 readers applauds MDC for its democratic struggle in Zimbabwe, while few readers discredit it for its contribution to the economic meltdown by embracing Western sanctions.

The political discourse illustrated in Figure 1, shows the link that exists between MDC and the Western governments. This means readers' political discourse points out that there is positive political relationship between MDC and Western governments particularly Britain and America. However, the relationship has made MDC unpopular among few readers. This is seen by their use of words such as "puppets" and "Western origin propaganda"

*"It really must suck that no one buys your Western origin propaganda. The majority has woken up to the near disaster of an MDC puppet government"* (Sham 2014).

*"Clutches of puppets"* (Rukudzo 2014).

*"Western countries want change of leadership just like the majority in the MDC"* (AFROboy 2014).

The political discourse also involves the labeling of political leaders with regard to their polit-



in power after losing to Mugabe in 2002, 2008 and 2013 elections. A total number of 18 readers show their disappointment in the MDC leadership

Intra-conflicts also exist in MDC and are reflected by the readers' comments. These conflicts include the MDC divisions such as the breakaway of major political leaders, Welshman Ncube and Tendai Biti.

### *Contextual Meaning of Texts*

The readers' online discourse consists of texts such as, *power, violence, propaganda* and the *Chimurenga*. *Chimurenga* is a Shona word that stands for the revolutionary struggle (Gunne and Thompson 2010). *Chimurenga* is highlighted within two readers' comments.

*"Funerals of Zim Patriots are an opportunity to reminisce about Chimurenga Successes, and pledges to the departed comrade to continue to wage the Chimurenga until ALL enemies of state are rubbished."* (Jukwa 2014)

*"The only chimurenga is us Zimbabweans against you zanooid dogs"* (bassman01 2014).

These two comments depict a political struggle characterized by the liberation struggle, which involves political and economic programs such as the land reform. The *Chimurenga* is also associated with the gains of the liberation struggle such as the ownership of land.

*"The fact that the black majority with 8-10 million hectares of prime farmland in their hands...ownership and control over their natural resources, which they did not have 35 years ago, puts them in a far better position to solve whatever problems that they have today"* (Djoser 2014).

The concept of violence is also depicted metaphorically in many instances by words such as *ruthless, dragged, fight, rise and blow*.

*"Fact still stands these ruthless policemen can be trashed, if all Zimbabweans can unite Mugabe can be dragged from his mansion."* (Smith 2014)

*"Prepare to blow vuvuzela Zimbabweans as nature is about to solve the equation."* (Babydoc 2014)

*"You will have to fight to the death, because we will."* (Bassman 2014)

*"What's going to happen is a new crop of politicians would rise and Zimbabwe will never be same again."* (Springs 2014)

The terminology used by readers to infer a state of unrest, also reflects a violent mood and enmity with the governing party.

Moreover, abuse of power is reflected in the form of dictatorship or political intolerance by political leaders. Phrases like "one man" and "one party" explicitly display an undemocratic nature and political intolerance by ZANU-PF members.

*"One of us grew up knowing one man and one party...majority of us has not met their president in the last 30 years"* (Guest 2014).

Anti-ZANU-PF sources maintain that the intimidation and intolerance of other political affiliations had been the characteristics of the ruling party.

*"RGM persecuted Kombayi and tormented Tekere because of differences in opinion."* (Nyongolo 2014)

*"Matibili wants puppets that see no evil, hear no evil against his corrupt government."* (Informer 2014)

*(Matibili is a nickname given to Mugabe by his opponents.)*

These statements reflect the intolerance of political difference, which extends to the act of election rigging.

The security services such as the Zimbabwe Republic Police (ZRP), Central Intelligence Organization (CIO) and the Army forces are depicted in the online political discourse as forces that protect the government against the civil society. They act as forms of power and are identified with ZANU-PF.

*"More ZANU retards the police ZRP."* (Sansole 2014)

*"In fact the army is in control behind the scenes and it's a question of time when they come out in the open."* (King 2014)

They are a symbol of national security that safeguards the interests of ZANU-PF and its government (Gunnars 2014).

The readers' comments also reflect the use of propaganda by the government through the manipulation of the media. *The Herald* newspaper is seen as pro-ZANU-PF and *Nehandara-dio.com* is portrayed as pro-MDC. Readers comment on the standard of journalism displayed by these publications.

*"We know herald turning the other way on news like this concerning top government officials."* (Gudu 2014)

*"The Herald should have made this a FRONT Page Story, but as you know they put it*

on page TWO so that OUR Commissioner General is not embarrassed like Morgan was. What a paper. If it was not for business, I would not buy it." (Zuruvi 2014)

"Didn't lie like the Nehanda online publication always does." (Gudu 2014)

"It's clear the Nikuv Matibili does not like sensible professionalism in media." (Informer 2014)

"Standards of journalism are going down the political drain." (Norris 2014)

Readers' comments indicate a bias in news reporting by journalists. *Herald* and *Nehandaredio.com* are specifically identified as partisan newspapers. Media censorship is also reflected in the readers' political discourse.

### The Economic Discourse

The online readers also discuss the economic meltdown in Zimbabwe echoed by factors such as unemployment, corruption (theft), use of foreign currency, electricity shortages, high inflation, water shortages, road potholes, poor medical facilities and diasporian discourse.

#### (a) Unemployment

"There are no jobs and civil servants don't know exactly when they will be paid." (Yizo 2014)

"Unemployment is rife and you want to take away more jobs...?" (Chitova 2014)

"There's nothing more dangerous than unemployed youth." (Mkhanyisi 2014)

"...Industries are closing big time." (Chokwadi 2014)

#### (b) Corruption (Theft, Murder)

Twenty-seven readers or sources give evidence on the issue of corruption as reflected in their comments.

"The ZANOIDS who kill, maim, loot and rape." (Mhunhu 2014)

"If they are allowed to bribe the police then they are also allowed to rule the roads." (Tafunuka 2014)

"How can a country be led by such an old man who because of age is being abused by greedy and corrupt seniors in Zanu?" (truth0001 2014)

"In the same respect, if a country is run by thieves and thugs masquerading to be government." (inini1545 2014)

"Mdc do not steal povo assets." (Supermondo 2014)

"I suppose a car accident will be arranged." (BoBo 2014)

"Death sentence in ZANU to ask for leadership change, that is why no one will dare. Did a candle kill Mujuru?" (AFROboy 2014)

#### (c) Use of Foreign Currency

"There is no Zimbabwean currency, the economy is in pieces you can't put together... now can a broad minded person tell me Mugabe is better." (Yizo 2014)

#### (d) Water Shortages and Poor Medical Facilities

"This country has been moved backwards since 1980 and that is the reason the President seeks medical attention outside the country and I also presume he brings his water from there for daily use." (Moosa 2014)

"The poor and ordinary have an average lifespan of 37 years." (Nehanda 2014)

#### (e) Diaspora

A population of 15 readers engages in the diasporian discourse.

"Not to mention that we are all over the world far from our families because of the economic meltdown caused by Mugabe." (Ronald 2014)

"ZANU was the reason why you left Zimbabwe." (dibala 2014)

#### (f) Road Potholes and Accidents

"Close to 2,000 people die in accidents annually, with most incidents linked to human error. According to the UN, 2,900 civilians were killed in Afghanistan in 2013. Spot the difference competition!" (Monkeynuts 2014)

"How can you attribute all accidents to human error when you have one of the narrowest roads in Africa." (JAYA 2014)

The segments of the sub-themes reflected in coded comments represent economic challenges discussed by readers online. More especially



the issue of corruption has more comments and references than other economic or political factors. A total number of 27 readers discuss corruption in terms of theft and murder practiced by political leaders. This is shown by 15 readers who demonstrate their disappointment in the current political situation.

### Other Inferences from Readers' Comments

Political and economic discourse also denotes readers' perspectives on political change and economic stability. Readers' perspectives convey hope for leadership change as in due time. Time is reflected in several comments as a force that brings change.

*"A prince must move with time and understand the need of his subject otherwise he will lose control of his estate."* (Guest 2014)

*"Mortal souls will forever be vulnerable to the same winds that prevail on human beings as temporary creatures on this earth."* (United 2014)

*"It's time to retire commissioner."* (Juju 2014)

*"The flesh is weak and the spirit is not willing retire please."* (Mimi 2014)

These comments selected represent a number of comments that raise the issue of time and decay. Death is the most common word used to mean the concept of nature as the ultimate force that renders every powerful politician common. This shows that readers online eagerly wait for a political change in the Zimbabwean political sphere. Factors like death, sickness, age and retirement are recited several times.

## DISCUSSION

Media audiences act as news agents and generate news for themselves (Henrich and Holmes 2013; Schuth et al. 2007; Domingo 2010). The media sets the agenda for discussion on political and economic issues, and the readers further discuss these political and economic issues. These readers deliberate themselves into political discourse, "encouraging quality debate and a value of information exchanges" (McMillan 2013). The researchers found that readers have multiple perspectives. However, some of their perspectives are unstable and can change determined by the change of media discourse. This paper reveals that media has direct or indirect

influence on the readers' reasoning or thoughts. The paper finds that readers' political views are polarized amid political differences in affiliation with either ZANU-PF or MDC. The researchers realized that just like polarized political news in Zimbabwe (Chuma 2005; Chibwe 2016), readers' political perspectives are also a result of political polarization.

Some of the readers' interpretation of political and economic issues is influenced by their political interests rather than a rational view on political and economic issues. Readers use the public commentary forum to fight political battles between MDC and ZANU-PF. The findings of this paper might be adjacent with Mungwari and Vhutuza's (2016) findings that the state controlled media is used as platform by ZANU-PF elites to fight over their intra-political party issues such as factionalism.

This paper highlights that the battles fought on the readers' commentary forums in Zimbabwe are either between ZANU-PF and MDC and are either intra-MDC issues or intra-ZANU-PF and less about new founded political parties. The political battles between ZANU-PF and MDC are therefore, fought on these online readers' commentary forums. There are very few readers' that are not partisan or neutral that displayed a rational constructive criticism. Therefore, this paper notes that affiliations with ZANU-PF or MDC affected readers' attitudes, behavior, interpretation and political discussion. This paper asserts that the media discourse established through political and economic news articles can influence readers' political discourse. The political and economic issues presented by the media can spill over to societal domains (Vliegert-hart and Walgrave 2011), thereby producing a divided discursive community. The comments of readers towards political or economic issues say or reveal a partisan political community. This is highlighted by readers' attribution of political, economic or societal problems to ZANU-PF's mismanagement of the economy, MDC political formations and the economic sanctions imposed by the West.

The economic problems are viewed as consequences of ZANU-PF's economic decision-making and political policies. Readers, therefore view economic challenges as consequences of ZANU-PF "inefficient" political policies. Such readers with so much resentment against ZANU-PF and its policies are either pro MDC or independent commenters. In contrast, pro-ZANU-

PF commenters support government economic policies and attribute economic challenges to MDC's opposition of these government policies. Such a parallelism gives the researchers a notion that readers are very political and their political activism influences their rational judgment.

The political activism reflected by readers is at its extreme either influenced by personal understanding or experiences within the political sphere. Experience plays a greater role in establishing individual perception of reality (Molly 2015). Readers' political perspectives towards political and economic issues are extremely divergent (Ajiboye 2013). The researchers assume that the polarization in readers' perspective is determined by the political antagonism that exists between the major political parties in Zimbabwe. Readers view ZANU-PF as a violent party, which can do anything in order to keep itself in power and MDC as a political party formed to remove ZANU-PF from power. This political antagonism makes it hard for readers from different camps to reason together yet produce undemocratic conversations and political intolerance.

Political intolerance or undemocratic nature of readers' comments online might be reflecting the undemocratic reality in the political sphere in Zimbabwe. This adds to the issues of corruption, political violence, murder, brutality and abuse of power reflected in their comments, hence showing an undemocratic state. This paper also highlights that readers' comments reflect a country waiting for democratic leadership change. However, their comments do not reflect a democratic behavior they are hoping for.

The readers' discussion on the public commentary forum informs a lot about their expectations in the future. Their political discourse reflects much of their expectations pertaining to their perspectives on political leadership. This therefore, entails that their discussion is but voices contesting, seeking to be heard and battling for a change. Readers therefore use the public commentary for political deliberation (Banda 2010). Since they are politically oriented, the public commentary acts as a public sphere (Habermas 1989) where they display their political activism.

### CONCLUSION

The researchers extracted several political and economic themes from the readers' comments

shown in Figure 1. The researchers found out that the readers are eager to comment on political or economic matters that affect their daily lives. Political and economic themes extracted range from their political affiliation with either ZANU-PF or MDC. Readers' political affiliation also influences their attitudes, behavior and understanding towards issues such as economic meltdown, corruption, Western influence, dictatorship and national development in Zimbabwe.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper notes that the readers' political discourse online is a reflection of the real political and economic events in the Zimbabwean public sphere. The readers are Zimbabwean and show understanding while they display nostalgic sentiments about their country. The findings of this paper, therefore, reflect the political and economic problems of Zimbabwe but some issues might be exaggerated or misrepresented by readers. The general overview is that the readers' political or economic discourse is informative and can make one understand the depth of some political and economic issues in Zimbabwe. Even though their comments are polarized readers discuss and generate extra news for themselves useful for the analysis.

### LIMITATIONS

This research faced challenges on the issue of data collection, especially the collection of political and economic news articles. The collection of readers' comments was much easier considering the fact that their comments were attached to the news articles. The researcher waited for almost for two weeks in order to collect readers' comments attached to a political or economic new story. The number of comments collected differed from this news article to the other due to the readers' generated content found. The issues generated by readers online may not be recommended as original news but may represent the political or economic reality in Zimbabwe.

### For Future Studies

To avoid limitation on the issue of anonymity and to make the results more reliable, the researcher suggests a further research based on

interviews with the participants or commenters, in order to get their own interpretations about their comments online. However, such a research would need a methodology that encompasses more than 200 commenters scattered in diaspora and in Zimbabwe, since some of these readers comment from outside the country. There is also a problem with *diasporian* discourse because the information might be factually void. A future research is needed to study media audiences within the Zimbabwean terrain.

The researcher also suggests conversational analysis to study readers' conversational influence on each other. Future research is also needed to find out why readers engage in public deliberation online and how do they set the agenda for themselves.

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